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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways diverse elementary school students may be taught to understand and respond constructively to social and interpersonal conflict, by studying the implemented curriculum in one public elementary classroom. In this urban Canadian classroom, well over half of the 33 students were recent immigrants with diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Conflict education was integrated with other academic subject matter, especially language arts and social studies. The lessons were organized around key ideas for understanding conflict, based on conflict resolution theory, using familiar and unfamiliar examples of conflict at various stages, including wars and political disputes. A series of vignettes illustrates particular lessons and the student work the lessons inspired. The analysis focuses on the processes and subject matter through which students developed understandings about conflict and conflict resolution. The study substantiates the idea that young children are indeed able to handle complex political and international conflicts. In fact, their conceptual sophistication for handling interpersonal conflicts seems to be enhanced by their understanding of intergroup conflicts. (Contains 73 references.) (SLD)

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Integrated Elementary Curriculum About Conflict Resolution: Can Children Handle Global Politics?

by

Kathy Bickmore

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Integrated elementary curriculum about conflict resolution: Can children handle global politics?

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Pluralist democracy depends on diverse citizens' development of capacity to think independently in the face of conflict. Conflict management, an important ingredient of democratic education, is increasingly taught (explicitly) in public schools. However, these lessons are often marginal to the core curriculum, and often conflict lessons emphasize interpersonal communication and impulse control instead of broader concept development. Complex or controversial and larger-scale human conflicts are often ignored, especially in elementary social studies (Hahn 1996 , Houser 1996, Soley 1996) and in conflict resolution programs (Carruthers et. al. 1996, Johnson & Johnson 1996, Noguera 1995). In this postmodern world — involving instant mass communications and diverse cultural identities (Elkind 1995) — is it appropriate to assume that children are more capable of learning about inter-personal conflicts than inter-group conflicts? Especially in multicultural classrooms, children may draw from a wide range of global as well as local knowledge to think critically about human problems. Conflict education should be broadened and brought in from the margins, to strengthen the core of democratic public education.

This paper explores the ways diverse elementary students may be taught to understand and to respond constructively to social and interpersonal conflict, by studying the implemented curriculum in one public elementary classroom. In this classroom, conflict education was integrated with other academic subject-matter, especially language and social studies. The lessons were organized around key ideas for understanding conflict, based on conflict resolution theory (Curle & Dugan 1982, Deutsch 1973, Kriesberg 1982), using both familiar and unfamiliar examples of conflict at various stages. The class studied situations such as the plight of refugees, the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda and Zaire, bullying and exclusion conflicts on the school playground, conflicts over the appropriate development and use of water resources, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Pedagogies brought in children's diverse

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experiences through drama, literature, geographic study, small group tasks, and open discussion. The young people in this classroom showed their interest in a broad range of education for sustainable peace, well beyond the interpersonal conflict resolution skills often offered in elementary schools. This exploratory study begins to develop a conceptual framework regarding the ways and means of conflict education.

Following a brief review of related literature and a description of my research methods, the paper presents a series of vignettes illustrating particular lessons and the student work they inspired. The analysis focuses on the processes and subject-matter through which students developed understandings about conflict and conflict resolution. The study substantiates the idea that young children are indeed able to handle complex political and international conflicts. In fact, their conceptual sophistication for handling interpersonal conflicts seems to be enhanced by the sense they make of such intergroup conflicts. From these descriptive analyses, I derive the beginnings of a framework for understanding the principles of academically-sound integrated conflict education.

Literature review:

Conflict is a powerful organizing idea: understanding the concept of conflict is important for learning to manage interpersonal and social problems (Deutsch 1993), and important for democratic citizenship (Hahn 1996, Merelman 1990). Because conflict is a natural element of human life, it intersects with the key ideas and knowledge-building processes of any curricular subject (Bickmore 1997, 1998). Conflict education's major elements include:

(1) understanding the causes and forms of conflict (diverse human needs and wants, violence and nonviolence),
(2) understanding the role of conflict in human relationships, especially the notion of contrasting viewpoints, feelings, and interests,
(3) understanding how conflicts present choices, and capacity to evaluate the positive and negative consequences of such choices, and
(4) capacity to apply conflict resolution processes, to create and evaluate multiple potential responses to problems.

It is both possible and desirable to integrate these concepts into the academic curriculum. Integration is not necessarily a substitute for concentrated attention to conflict and conflict resolution: on the contrary, conflict can provide a thematic focus that connects school subjects to one another and to 'real' democratic life (Carruthers et. al. 1996). Integrated curriculum builds in multiple applications of concepts, and extends developmental time, to improve students' capacities to generalize and to transfer school knowledge to new uses (Taba 1963). Like authentic intellectual work in any subject area (Scheurman & Newmann 1998), conflict education involves analysis of problems, interpretation of viewpoints, and negotiation of meanings, in ways that connect 'academic' questions to real experiences and social problems. Integration of conflict in the curriculum stimulates thinking and makes school knowledge more meaningful for young

learners. Where curriculum avoids or censors serious challenges, classrooms become safe but complacent environments, offering little opportunity to learn, to include marginalized students, or to develop interest in school learning (Houser 1996).

The frequently-challenged notion of 'expanding horizons' is alive and well in North American public school curricula. Conflict resolution lessons, for example, are generally sequenced in a linear fashion — beginning young children with the small, local, familiar, and non-controversial, and moving in later grades (if at all) into wider global or 'political' arenas (Carruthers et. al. 1996). The assumptions underlying this curriculum pattern are flawed. First, such curriculum assumes that people's minds develop in concentric circles, that young children are more interested in familiar neighbors than in the weird and the peculiar, for example monsters or purple dinosaurs (Egan 1986). Worse, it relies on an assumed cultural common ground that does not take into account students' diverse life experiences. For example, children brought up in contested regimes, or in rapidly-changing circumstances such as immigration or cultural border areas, may develop a valuable repertoire of experiences and vocabulary for understanding inter-group conflicts (Anzaldúa 1987, Merelman 1990).

The notion of 'developmental appropriateness,' upon which the expanding horizons approach is based, can be a cover for educators' own fears of handling potentially-controversial topics (Houser 1996, Miner 1998, Soley 1996). Limiting elementary students' exploration horizons risks rendering school knowledge irrelevant to the lived concerns of today's children. In the area of conflict education particularly, an overly-cautious expanding horizons approach misses the powerful motivation embedded in children's imaginations and in their media-fed awareness of the wider world.

Method:

This single case study investigates the dynamics of curriculum interpretation regarding conflict education, and diverse students' responses to the learning opportunities thus created, in one social context. Following an adaptation of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967), I collected detailed descriptions of conflict education activities, including formative assessment tasks, in one multicultural elementary classroom. Data collection was interspersed with analysis, conducted independently and in frequent dialogue with the teacher. This resulted in refinement of conceptual categories and further elaboration— first, of the conflict education curriculum-in-use in this context, and second, of the more general understanding of conflict education toward which this study is reaching. Throughout the process, I was an engaged *participant* observer, drawing insights from my extended direct involvement with one teacher and her students.* Evelyn Fox Keller calls this stance dynamic objectivity: it "aims at a form of knowledge that grants to the world around us its independent integrity but does so in a way that

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* To protect the confidentiality of participants: pseudonyms are used in place of all proper names, details about individual children have been masked, and formal assessment information (students' marks) were not entered into field notes.

remains cognizant of, indeed relies on, our connectivity with that world" (1985, p.117). While sweeping conclusions would be unwarranted from such a small study, this kind of research deepens our understanding through direct engagement and collaborative dialogue in a particular context.

The site for this research was chosen purposively, as a setting that embodied many of the questions and possibilities embedded in this research program. In this grade four and five class in an urban public school, well over half of the 33 students were recent immigrants, with diverse language abilities and cultural backgrounds. The class included 24 (73%) in grade four, and 9 (27%) in grade five who had been with the same teacher the previous year, heterogeneously grouped in terms of achievement. The class had 14 girls (42%) and 19 boys (58%). More than two thirds of the children were first or second generation immigrants, coming mostly from the Middle East, India, China, Somalia, Trinidad and Tobago, Greece, and the earlier European migrations to Canada. The teacher, Ms. Alison, had considerable confidence, skill, and flexibility rooted in 24 years of teaching and educational leadership. I was intimately involved in the life of Ms. Alison's classroom from October to March (1996-97) and again for a few days in June (1997). I observed more than 30 hours of classroom lessons, including approximately 18 hours that I co-led or assisted with Ms. Alison. Outside of class time, I met with Ms. Alison for more than 12 hours of analysis, discussion, and joint planning. Ms. Alison taught essentially the same group of students the following year in grades five and six; we held a follow-up discussion a year after the study (March 1998). In addition, I was regularly involved in this school as a whole, throughout the school year, in relation to other conflict resolution and teacher education responsibilities.

The main research question asks what conflict education would look like, if it included global and well as interpersonal topics, integrated into an upper-elementary curriculum in an urban classroom with a diverse multicultural population. Two related questions elaborate the particular concerns of this study:

- How could conflict education be woven together with academic achievement goals? That is, how could children develop their capacities to handle the concept of conflict, while at the same time pursuing core curricular objectives?
- What might constitute an alternative to the expanding horizons approach to conflict studies? Would complex social or political material present a more difficult developmental challenge to young learners than interpersonal topics?

These questions are addressed through analysis of descriptive vignettes regarding the classroom's curriculum-in-use, selected to represent evidence of curriculum process and content, and students' developing understandings of conflict.

Findings:

The following vignettes were chosen to reflect the three major themes in understanding conflict that emerged in Ms. Alison's curriculum — (1) What is conflict? (2) Sources of conflict: How do conflicts reflect different human needs and perspectives? (3) Managing conflict: What are the consequences of different choices in handling conflict, and how do these choices affect social relationships? Each of these themes builds upon the preceding theme, gradually elaborating the children's understandings of the concept. The vignettes proceed chronologically, reflecting the

conceptual organization of this curriculum as it was implemented, and are interspersed with analytical commentary to show how data was analyzed to develop grounded theory. Other lessons are summarized briefly, to give a sense of where the vignettes fit in the whole integrated curriculum. The final vignette revisits the first theme, to show the students' development of understanding over the eight months of the study.

Report cards sent home to students' parents in early February emphasized "Conflicts in school, Ontario, and the world" as the major cross-curricular theme of the fall term. Ms. Alison's assessments emphasized language arts, drama, and social studies skills outcomes, taken from the school board's version of the Ontario Common Curriculum, such as:

- listen for information to understand others' experience;
- speak with growing confidence to inform, question, and understand others' experience in a variety of school situations;
- investigate fictional and real relationships, feelings, and experiences through role play and presentation;
- use inclusive and bias free language and explain its importance;
- use appropriate language to [identify and] resolve conflicts;
- read fiction, news articles, and other informative materials, assigned and selected independently, that reflect diversity of Canadian and global society..."
- write in role;
- "explain the relationships between present actions and preferred and probable futures;
- recognize that an event can have more than one cause;
- describe a variety of perspectives on an issue, and explain how perspectives are shaped and how they are changed with new information;
- locate places on a variety of maps;
- locate significant places in Canada and in world events;
- make informed reasoned judgments about what is fair in particular cases;
- identify sources of conflict in the school, community, and society and suggest appropriate ways to deal with them;
- identify situations in Canada and the world where resources are distributed unequally;
- analyze how media influences our perceptions about other people;
- demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of diverse people through the direct experience of drama and music;
- express personal views through art work."

In the second semester, the concept of conflict was further extended to include math, science, and technology as well as language arts and social studies. In particular, the class studied humans' relationships to the water cycle, locally and as part of an area study of the Middle East. Additional curriculum outcomes included:

- apply mathematical concepts to new situations and other subject areas [for example, students created pie charts and graphs depicting uses and abuses of water];
- describe cyclical occurrences and changes in the natural world which affect every day life [water cycles];

• examine different explanations of and solutions to a problem, determine their validity, and apply the most appropriate solution;
• discuss how scientific research and technological developments are human endeavors and are influenced by all the factors which affect individuals and society."

What is conflict?

The research began on October 21 (and ended in June) by asking students to define conflict, by generating examples of conflict and contrasting these with non-examples. The children gathered in a circle in a carpeted part of the room. Ms. Alison introduced me to the students, saying that the class would be beginning some new activities and I would be with the class for some of these. I told the group that I was especially interested in how young people — such as themselves — learn to handle conflict, problem-solving, and peacemaking. Ms. Alison asked the class to, "Think of a word I already know," that would describe all the different examples she was going to give.

"Just now [as the class gathered on the carpet], somebody said 'the boys always get the cushions.' That's an example. Today, our class and another class arrived at the library at the same time [when there was only room for one class].... Earlier, we talked about the General Motors strike.... Dr. Bickmore said 'problem' a moment ago; that's a hint. What do we call problems or disagreements? What's a synonym?" Nine or ten students made guesses, most of them not even close. Ms. Alison started spelling out the word CONFLICT on the chalkboard; she got all the way past L before anybody guessed the word. Ms. Alison wrote the word CONFLICT, pronounced it aloud, and asked, "How many know that word?" Eleven (of 33) students raised their hands. Ms. Alison asked them to give an example: five or six successfully gave examples of conflicts.

This initial unfamiliarity with the term "conflict" is less surprising when one recalls that English was a second language for almost two thirds of the class. Language proficiency ranged from basic oral functioning (and almost no literacy skill) to well above 'grade level' in fluency and vocabulary, among both monolingual English and ESL speakers. From the blank looks on their faces and the unevenness of their explanations and examples, however, it is clear that the difficulty was not merely vocabulary. The concept of conflict was initially unfamiliar to most of the students. However, the *experience* of conflict was familiar, and in the passage above one can see that some of the students were beginning to connect their experiences with the concept. The concept-building process continued for about an hour in all that day, with students presenting many examples and thinking aloud about why each one might be (or might not be) an instance of conflict.

I prompted for personal and interpersonal conflicts, asking students to recall and imagine decisions they made, or problems they encountered, at

various stages of the day ('when you got up this morning and got ready for school ... conflicts that have happened here at school ... conflicts you have had after school ...'). Gradually, the children's examples became more frequently correct applications of the term conflict, such as: what to wear, not wanting to get out of bed but not wanting to be late to school, disagreement with mother regarding what to eat for breakfast, problems with pushing or sharing toys at recess, arguments with siblings. With some direct encouragement of a few quiet students, eventually every child did offer an example of a conflict in which they had been a participant. For example, Ms. Alison asked one little boy, recently arrived in the class, "You recently moved to Toronto. Did that cause any conflict for you? Was there anything you were sad to leave behind, in Trinidad and Tobago?" The child answered with evident sadness, "Yes. My brother." Teachers and classmates expressed sympathy.

Later in the afternoon, I asked the class for examples of conflict in books they had read or news reports they had heard, to see whether they had begun to understand that conflicts could take other forms beyond the intrapersonal or interpersonal. This question didn't provoke much response. When Ms. Alison reminded the class of the *Little House on the Prairie* book they had read together recently (Wilder 19???), one confident child answered that there was a conflict between the Indians and the Pioneers over control of the land where the story's main characters settled. To end the lesson, Ms. Alison asked the class to synthesize: "What do all these conflicts have in common?" Three or four students offered the following characteristics: people wanting different things, (sometimes) anger, a problem having two or more sides.

In the space of an hour, most of Ms. Alison's class developed a rudimentary understanding of the word conflict, at least as it applied to the individual level. The lesson took place during the last hour of a school day, and an hour is a long time for young people to concentrate on one topic. Thus students' relative silence regarding larger-scale conflicts may have resulted from not understanding the connection, or simply from getting tired. Clearly, the conceptual connection between extended intergroup conflicts (such as Native North Americans versus European-origin Pioneers over land) and short-term interpersonal conflicts (such as disagreements with a parent over breakfast) was not immediately or fully clear to everybody in this class. Conflict as a concept was relatively unfamiliar, as this curriculum began.

To reinforce the applicability of the conflict concept to social as well as interpersonal disagreements, a homework assignment and subsequent lessons invited the class to investigate diverse opinions associated with the 'Days of Action,' a series of local work stoppages protesting provincial government policies that were affecting many students' families at the time. Students wrote in their own journals (with widely-varying proficiency) about who was involved, what opinions various actors held, and how the media portrayed the sources and symptoms of the Days of Action conflicts. Curricular objectives for language arts included speaking and listening for information regarding others' experience, reading news articles that reflected the diversity of Canadian society, beginning to identify examples of bias in

stories, and writing based on collected information and personal experiences. Social studies objectives included describing a variety of perspectives on an issue, locating significant places in their city, and beginning to explain the role of government in providing for the needs and wants of people and for keeping order. Most students showed that they were beginning to sort out the idea that there can be different viewpoints regarding the 'same' event or problem.

Sources of conflict: human needs and perspectives:

An extended series of lessons guided students to describe a variety of basic human needs, to distinguish needs from wants, and to analyze the ways unmet needs might be sources of conflict. For example on October 28, the children brainstormed and then developed drama skits in small groups, depicting conflicts over meeting people's needs. Students created the following skits. After each group presented their classmates guessed which needs and conflicts were involved:

(1) There was not enough clean drinking water for everybody in the group.
(2) There was a traffic accident because a driver (with no education) couldn't read a stop sign.
(3) One family was homeless because they had no money for rent, while another family had a comfortable cushioned space.
(4) Two people had food, two others were hungry, and one decided to share.
(5) A person received good medical care for a broken leg, while another student played the role of the Premier, saying he was cutting the hospital's funding.
(6) Three friends disagreed about whether to give away a coat to a person who had insufficient clothing and was cold.
(7) The air was so polluted that the actors coughed and gagged, but they couldn't figure out who was to blame for the problem.

Earlier class discussions about the Days of Action conflict (regarding government funding for social services), as well as the previous year's curriculum about pollution, were evident in the groups' ideas. It was clear from the students' presentations that social and political conflicts were indeed part of their repertoire of experiences and concerns, and that they had come to understand that the term 'conflict' applies to both intergroup or political and interpersonal problems.

In the brainstorming session that preceded the small group work, I had explicitly prompted for less visible human needs that would be evident in familiar interpersonal or family conflicts, such as respect or friendship. However, the examples students chose to develop were social and even controversial issues. In subsequent lessons, students were drew individual pictures reflecting conflicts over unmet human needs: again they all chose social conflicts regarding pollution and resource distribution, rather than small-scale personal conflicts. Physiological needs, and the conflicts that arise from those needs not being equitably met in our society, were tangible and meaningful to these children. Questions of psychological needs in interpersonal conflicts were either too complex or considered too emotionally risky to discuss here, so the students chose not to pursue them at this

point in the school year. The models they did present, and the discussions that followed, provided insights into conflict that might have been missed in a curriculum that avoided complex or politically-charged issues. Ms. Alison's curriculum pursued these social and global connections in the following month, extending students' understandings of the sources of conflict and developing the idea that conflict involves different viewpoints or perspectives.

> On November 6 for example, Ms. Alison showed each member of the class a dramatic photograph, cut from a recent newspaper, showing two hungry children reaching out for food in a refugee encampment in Zaire. She asked, "What do the people in the picture really need?" She guided students to distinguish the main need — food — from various "wants," and to describe the visual clues that showed them that the children in the picture were hungry. Then, "Who are all the different people involved in this problem, even though they're not necessarily shown in the picture?" Ms. Alison prompted the class to imagine who was "behind" the picture, in particular the aid worker toward whom the children were reaching. "What is the problem?" Reading the caption, a student answered, "There are not enough protein biscuits to go around, and they're hungry."
>
> Ms. Alison directed the students to act out what she called a 'tableau.' First (to everyone at the same time), "You're the aid worker. Go around distributing food, distributing food, then you run out. Freeze. How do you feel?" Second (again to everyone), "You're a hungry person, lined up for food, waiting, the food's coming around, then they run out. Freeze. Show how you feel." In de-briefing the exercise, students put their wide-ranging emotional responses to the conflict into words, including embarrassment, fear, frustration, envy, misery, and resignation.

Here, the class worked together to describe a human conflict of crisis proportions, and to articulate the ways various participants in that conflict might have thought and felt about the problem. Most members of the class were able (to some degree) to imagine themselves into the perspectives of participants in this conflict. This is not to say, of course, that either the teachers or the students really understood the many perspectives or complex sources of this whole conflict, as it would have looked on-site to participants in Rwanda or Zaire. In fact, it was the unfamiliarity and distance of this particular situation that made the broad outlines of this refugee food problem seem clearer. The news photograph presented only a snippet of a complex situation, and therefore presented an opportunity to highlight two particular key ideas in understanding conflict — the notion of human needs, and differing viewpoints regarding how to meet those needs.

The class pursued the question of human needs and wants as a source of conflict, and the question of incompatible perspectives as an element that defines conflict, in various ways over the next month or so. For example, the class learned vocabulary words/ concepts such as refuge and refugee in relation to a Remembrance Day program at the school, and continued to read about and discuss

the particular locations and situations of Rwanda, Burundi, and Zaire as they emerged in the daily news. Several of the children's families had come to Canada for refuge from difficult situations in their countries of origin, so many of these lessons served to label and clarify concepts with which some students were already familiar. Another language arts activity involved responding to a poem about hunger, "Heart Made of Bread," by 11-year-old Anna Soldi: somewhat less than half of the class successfully interpreted the poem's symbols and made sense of the poet's perspective; many found this task difficult. However, most of the class was very successful in a groupwork assignment based on the human needs pictures they had drawn earlier. By the end of November, virtually every student could describe a conflict depicted in a picture or story, describe who was directly or indirectly involved in that problem, and figure out each party's viewpoint (how they would see the conflict, and how they might feel about it).

Managing conflict: choices and relationships

The next challenge in Ms. Alison's curriculum was to extend students' understandings of conflict, applying the concept more directly to their own roles as participants in various communities. Beginning in December, a few lessons addressed the idea that participants in a conflict have choices, and that the positive and negative consequences of each possible response to the conflict can be predicted and evaluated.

The Rwandan troubles again presented a case study, an opportunity to step outside of the complicated here-and-now. Ms. Alison brought in an article by Anne McIlroy in the *Globe and Mail*: "Hutus returning home to find Tutsi squatters," and read/ interpreted it in class with the students on December 2. The journalist personalizes the problem of competing claims on a homeland, by telling the story of a Hutu family of eleven who managed to get back from the refugee encampment to which they had fled during the violent outburst between Tutsis and Hutus, only to find a Tutsi family living in 'their' two room house. They ended up sharing the house, with the Tutsi family in one room and the Hutu family in the other. As the journalist tells it, "last night, a rock came through the window." It was not clear who the assault had come from. The class began to define the problem, and to discuss the different ways that the people involved might handle the situation.

The next day, the class was arranged in two equal-sized lines, facing one another (one line acting as Tutsis, the other side being Hutus). With the children's eyes closed, Ms. Alison reviewed the story, ending at the moment the rock came through the window. She reminded the children to stay in place in the line, while everybody acted this out at once: "Imagine that you ran outside your room to see what was the matter, and found yourself face to face with your Tutsi (or Hutu) neighbor (the person standing across from you). When you open your eyes, tell or show your neighbor what you want, and what you are going to do. When you hear the rattle, freeze." The class observed, named, and discussed the various responses to conflict that emerged. I led the class to look for patterns in the types of choices

represented — avoid [postpone or run away], fight [use violence], or try to resolve.

The homework was another language arts 'benchmark' assessment task, writing in role. Students each wrote from the point of view of the Hutu or Tutsi person they had represented in the 'hassle line' role play. Their assignment was to describe the best solution to the conflict from their point of view, and to explain why by predicting the consequences of that choice. Two weeks later, the class listed the many responses to this conflict that they had imagined. These included:

Rivalry forever - keep fighting - might have another war
Some people make peace
Escape/ run away/ hide
Ask what happened: who threw the rock?
Help the other family to build another house
Divide the rooms and the food, share the land
Attack back (die or be trapped), destroy the house
Say this is 'my' house, make the other group get out
Negotiate - we will leave if you help us build more houses
Get somebody to give us another bed and room
Call for help - are there police?
Vote on two presidents for the country - one Tutsi, one Hutu
Split the country in half

First, the class reviewed the distinction between avoidance, using violence, and confronting the conflict, and students categorized the above responses accordingly. Next, students predicted the consequences of each response, and labeled them Win-Win, Win-Lose, or Lose-Lose.

Sometimes, students agreed unanimously that certain responses to the conflict were Lose-Lose or Win-Lose choices. On others, students disagreed about the consequences they predicted: some students' world views were more pessimistic than their classmates'. Their fervent discussions about these predictions served as a think-aloud exercise, in which children modeled for one another how various actors might respond to various conflicts, and how to predict and evaluate the results of such actions. This conceptual framework was applied, in subsequent lessons, to conflicts in children's stories such as "Isabel the Witch" and "In Which Eeyore Loses a Tail and Pooh Finds One," (Milne) and *Name Calling* (Sadu).

Managing conflict extended: choices and relationships in relation to bullying

In January and early February, Ms. Alison directed the class's attention to a kind of conflict that appeared more complex, not least because it occurred much closer to home. Through art, language, literature, and social studies lessons, the class applied their new vocabulary regarding conflict to the problems of teasing, bullying, and exclusion, emphasizing the ways these problems occurred on and around their own school playground. The key ideas studied earlier — human

needs, different perspectives, choices and consequences in handling conflict — were now applied at a more complex level. Bullying/ exclusion problems are challenging instances of conflict for young students like Ms. Alison's class, for three reasons. First, bullying and exclusion are complex conflicts because they involve unequal power, and shifting relations of power as groups re-form and pick on various individuals. Second, these problems were complex for these students because many of them were direct or indirect participants — the conflicts involved themselves or people they knew, about whom they had complicated feelings. Third, bullying conflicts are qualitatively different from the conflicts discussed earlier, because the human needs at their root involve intrapersonal conflicts over intangibles such as self-respect and friendship, rather than involving clear disagreements regarding how to handle a visible problem. Thus this locally-familiar problem was a more difficult application of the concept of conflict. Ms. Alison's students were mainly eager to talk about these problems, and the foregoing months of concept-building provided a crucial foundation for these discussions.

> On January 7, Ms. Alison began with a pre-assessment activity, inviting students (in small groups) to draw pictures of bullies (drawn from their imaginations). Later, she asked students to add words: "What would the bully be saying?" Debriefing with the whole group, Ms. Alison asked, "How would you describe these bullies?" Students described a single big, strong, rude, male. Some students also described individuals who were 'dumb' (unintelligent), wore torn clothing and spoke slang. Ms. Alison asked, "Who usually gets picked on?" Students listed smaller people, younger children, disabled people, and people who seem different from the norm. When the teacher asked, "Who has ever felt like they *wanted* to bully somebody?" about twenty students raised their hands (many of them tentatively, waiting to see what peers did, first). "Why?" Ms. Alison asked. Children mentioned having been picked on themselves, either by the same person or by somebody else.

The similarity of the students' initial images of bullies to prevailing cultural stereotypes suggests that these conceptions are not necessarily well-rooted in the children's own experiences. Some children included social class bias in their images, emphasizing characteristics such as torn clothing, colloquial speech patterns, rude manners, or failure in school. This notion of the bully is common in some children's literature; thus students may have been opening the conversation with the 'school knowledge' they imagined the teacher wanted to hear. As the students became more comfortable discussing the issue, and more skilled in applying new vocabulary to their own experiences, a different image of bullying emerged. Later class discussions, as well as the research literature on bullying, generally describe *groups* of children (of either gender) picking on or excluding another child, rather than single 'bad boy' individuals terrorizing weaker peers (Pepler & Craig 1994, Smith & Sharp 1994). Just as students had initially understood 'conflict' simplistically as fighting or violence, students initially understood the term 'bullying' as referring to individual 'bullies.' This simpler conception may have

allowed the children to externalize the problem (blaming it on 'bad people'), but even so almost two-thirds of the class was willing to admit that they had felt the *inclination* to bully others.

A lesson the following week (January 14) began by using a strategy with which the students had become familiar. I read aloud the children's book *Name Calling*, by Itah Sadu, stopping frequently to show pictures, to invite students to interpret and label various characters' feelings, to predict consequences of various actions, and so forth. The new element in the curriculum, raised by this story, was the idea that the conflict 'escalates,' in this case by compounding the misunderstanding and adding more and more children to the group that was picking on a schoolmate. The class discussed the phenomena of groups picking on individuals and of conflict escalation, comparing and connecting these with their earlier conceptions of bullying. Many students described bullying problems among siblings: some had older siblings who picked on them, others had younger siblings whom they, or they and their friends, sometimes bullied.

Next, Ms. Alison brought out an essay published recently in the local newspaper, called "Four-season games for girls" (Bonenfant 1997, p. A16). She read aloud, "The high school football season is coming to an end, but the games that girls play go on for all seasons. Target is a favorite sport of adolescent girls. It requires no skill, no strength and no brains. The strategy is to single out one particular girl to humiliate and isolate." Ms. Alison noted that the article was about older girls, but that she thought it also would sound familiar to the present group. She asked the class, "What kind of games might this be?" After a couple of minutes of thinking aloud, students made the connection to the book they had just read: "target" referred to picking on people, bullying. The teacher had a student write TARGET on the board and clarified its meaning.

"Why would we say that calling people names is like a game?" Ms. Alison asked. Several students volunteered immediately that picking on somebody could be fun, and that when bullying with a group, "You're like, protected.... You feel strong." Other students noticed that bullying, like many games and some conflicts, involves winning and losing. "Who has been picked on, a target?" At least 25 of the 32 children present raised their hands. "Who has been part of a group that picked on somebody?" Fourteen raised their hands. The discussion continued, probing the feelings of various children when they ganged up on somebody or were picked on. In asking students to predict the consequences of such bullying or targeting, the teacher reinforced the concept of conflict escalation.

It is evident that the students were beginning here to demystify the concept of bullying, connecting it to their own experience. Most were apparently able to identify (to varying degrees) with 'bully' as well as 'target' experiences. The following week, students in small groups wrote and acted out bullying skits, showing (by their inclusion of feelings and reasons for the problem) that they did

understand bullying situations to be a type of conflict. Their scenarios involved, for example: stealing a target's lunch money, calling a target a nerd for reading during recess, forcing a target to do others' homework, and exacting revenge for a target having bullied someone's little brother. Most groups demonstrated escalation in their skits, without having been prompted. The class discussed the problem that conflicts involving several people, once they had escalated, were very difficult to resolve. Over the next few weeks, most students thoughtfully considered the complex nature of bullying, and their own roles as potential or real participants in these kinds of conflicts.

In a second writing-in-role language assignment, Ms. Alison gave the class a general formula for including all of the characters and different viewpoints in a story about bullying. With this scaffold, all but two (of 30 handed in) showed that they could write fairly coherently about a complex conflict from the point of view of one of its participants. Almost equal numbers of students chose to write from the role of bullies (13, including 9 boys) as of targets (15, about equally boys and girls). (Two did not clearly write in role.) Of those who wrote in the 'bully' role, most (10) described themselves as followers, rather than ringleaders, of bullying activities. Here are three sample stories written in the role of targets, followed by two in the role of bullies. The examples were chosen to show the group's range of feelings, typical explanations for bullying and typical ways they handled the problem. (Children were instructed to make up pseudonyms; I reproduce the children's original spelling, some of which was corrected in later/ marked revisions. The stories with all female characters were written by girls; those with male or mixed characters were written by boys.)

"Sarah has been targetted by Victoria, Linda, and Judy, because Sarah is a Chinies and Victoria, Linda, and Judy are English. Sarah dose not know how to speak English because she is Chinies. She also has black hair and looks different. Victoria, Linda and Judy calls names, like there is baddy. Victoria is the leader. I am Sarah. Sarah is always been picked on.... She feels very sad and lonly and having no protection."

"Monttey has been targetted by Kam, San, and Mickey because he has dark skin, glasses and he can't speak english well. Every day Kam, San, and Mickey want 25 cents from Monttey. Also they beat him up. Sometimes at school they blame stuff on him. I am Monttey. He doesn't like what there doing to him at all. Every day he get's scared and sometimes he doesn't even come to school. Every day he cries and gets mad but he doesn't tell teachers."

"Timithy has been targetted by Ralph, Merry and Frank, because he has a learning disability, and needs speical help after school. They call him names like "no brainer." Ralph is the leader. I am Timithy. I feel mad inside and I also feel sad. I don't want to hurt them, I just want them to stop. I usually try to stay away from them but they keep running after me and taunting me. I'm afraid to tell the teacher because I think they'll tease me more. I know I should but I have doubts."

"Wendy has been targetted by me, Cable and Dinar, because we saw my sister getting beat up by Wendy. I'm the leader. Me, Cable, Dinar beat her up and We felt tough. We said to our selfes that it felt good beating her up. But I was worried she was going to get her gang but she told the teacher and we got in trouble."

"Lida has been targetted by Angie, May and Tina, because it took Lida 20 minutes for her to answer a math question. Angie is the leader. I am May. At first it felt good to pick on someone, but then I reallized that Lida hadn't done anything to hurt me or my feelings and then I remembered I wasn't so good in today's math sesion either.... In a way me and Lida are exacley alike. We dressed alike, we think alike, we're both horrible at math and we both loved to read. If Angie and Tina hated Lida so much why didn't they pick on me?"

It is no surprise that children cited perceived difference (including immigrant status, racial characteristics, and level of academic success) as a major reason for bullying conflicts (one story involved a student being targetted for being a 'nerd,' while several others targetted a student with academic difficulties). Many bullies enjoyed feelings of strength and power, at least temporarily, while some felt confusion, remorse, empathy for the target, or simply fear of retaliation or punishment.

The important thing about this set of learning experiences is that most of these young students, in this and further lessons through January and early February, showed that they had come to understand many of the subtleties (not just the symptoms) of conflict and conflict management. By applying the concept of conflict (developed earlier in relation to complex but distant social problems) to the personal and controversial phenomenon of bullying in their own schoolyard, students deepened their understandings of the major elements of conflict, including: point of view or perspective, the uneven relationship of feelings to actions, the idea that participants in conflicts have choices and the idea that their actions have consequences for self and others.

Managing conflict further extended: conflicts over resources and land

In the spring term beginning in February, the conflict theme was extended to embrace math, science, and technology, particularly through the study of water cycles, waterways, and human uses of water. A series of lessons and projects in March and April extended students' understandings of human needs, wants, and conflict by focusing on global and local disagreements over the uses of water resources. In May and June, the class embarked on an area study of the Middle East. They identified conflicts over water scarcity, control of land and oil resources, and poverty, as well as ideological and religious differences, as focal points for the study of that region. In pairs or threes, students examined particular Middle Eastern countries, and all contributed to a massive chart comparing geographic, demographic, and cultural data from the various countries (e.g. rainfall, water

sources, oil, exports, imports, size, population, per capita income, languages, government infant mortality rate, literacy rate, status of women, religion). Meanwhile, students contributed to an "I wonder..." poster on another wall of the classroom, based on class discussions and on "Oh, wow!" entries in their journals that they collected during their research. For example, one question on the poster asked, "If people are praying for peace, why is there so much war?"

In June, the whole class sat in a circle to discuss their deductions and interesting findings regarding the people of the Middle East. Students showed their understandings of conflict in comments such as the following, regarding government spending priorities.

"--If a country, such as Saudi Arabia, made a lot of money from selling oil, then why is the health care so bad [derived from high infant mortality rate of 59 per 1000]?"

"--If a country has a lot of oil, the government *could* pay for good services like health care and schools. Some countries do this more than others."

As often happened in this class, initial participation in this complex thinking-aloud process was fairly small, involving mostly five or six students, but as children got more comfortable with (and thus interested in) the ideas, involvement rose to include about twice that many active voices. About half the class was attentive but noticeably quiet, even when encouraged or cajoled to participate. This problem merits further study, since it is clear that those speaking were practicing more skills, and developing more confidence, than those who remained silent.

Summing up: What is conflict and what are its major elements?

June 19 was the last day of the project, taking place only a few days before the end of school. The activity was set up to provide an informal post-test, to see how the same students might answer the same question addressed at the beginning of the project: what is conflict?

Ms. Alison asked the students to once again assemble in (assigned heterogeneous) small groups, and to show what they understood about conflict by dramatizing a "real-life" conflict, either one that had happened to somebody in their group or one they had read about. Each presentation included a narrator, who described the setting and introduced each character. After each group performed their skit, the rest of the class worked together to identify the cause of the conflict in the skit ("what is the problem?"), the various viewpoints ("Who is involved and what do they want?"), and the form taken by the conflict ("what happens?"- "Was there escalation or violence?"). Last, each small group improvised and then evaluated possible solutions to each conflict (win-win, win-lose, or lose-lose and whether the solution seemed feasible and sustainable). The students' work was phenomenal, in its variety and in the depth of understanding shown.

> One group acted out a bullying situation, in which one child was getting picked on by schoolmates and blamed for something he hadn't done. Classmates picked up the different viewpoints of the various characters, labeled their feelings in ways that satisfied the actors, and described the escalation of the problem. The group invented several solutions that

involved gathering further information and negotiating, as well as getting help from authorities.

The second group presented a sibling conflict, in which a child was frustrated about his younger brother's continual interruptions and disturbances. Classmates again correctly interpreted the characters' viewpoints and escalating anger. They worked out a complex integrative solution, in which parents agreed to entertain the little brother for a short time, while the older brother found a quieter place to sit and agreed to play with his little brother later.

The third group presented a skit in which several boys were teasing a girl who couldn't kick the ball very far during a recess kickball game, while other characters stood by and did not intervene. The class identified the proud sense of male superiority experienced by those doing the teasing, the hurt, embarrassment, and empathy experienced by the bystanders, and the misery of the target. The girls, in particular, talked about the ways that they felt targetted, too, because they felt that many other girls were teased at other times. Their solution was to band together, get another ball to use in a different part of the schoolyard, and coach one another to improve their strength and ball-handling skills in a less-competitive atmosphere.

The last group presented a complex conflict over resources, specifically "who gets the land," in Israel/ Palestine. The skit included a lot of dialogue that escalated into name calling, stone throwing, and rubber bullets. The children playing Israeli Jews described their worries about security in what they saw as *their* homeland; the children playing Palestinians described their sense of loss, outrage, and insecurity about not controlling what they saw as *their* homeland. The class recommended peace talks, negotiating a fair division of the land, and building houses somewhere else rather than on disputed land.

To sum up, Ms. Alison and I led the class to compare the ways each of these and other scenarios exemplified different types of conflict, and the ways each conflict had various causes, contrasting viewpoints, choices and needs involved, and possibilities for solution.

I cannot, of course, verify from this scant evidence that every child understood every element of conflict. However, the year's activities and the final presentations demonstrated that most of this class of 9 and 10 year old children had developed a remarkable familiarity with and capacity to use some major concepts and generalizations associated with conflict, conflict resolution, and alternatives to violence. Every child in the room was involved in presenting a conflict scenario, and every child made at least a few coherent comments about each of the other conflict scenarios presented to them, showing that they had some understanding of the causes and forms of conflict, the role of conflict in human relationships, the ways conflicts may present choices, and the range of possible conflict resolution processes.

A partial conclusion:

This research connects two major components of democratic education — social relationships in a particular learning climate, and inclusion of conflict in the content of academic lessons. The most important contribution of such an exploratory study is to highlight questions and concepts for future discussion and research. Ms. Alison's students appeared to benefit from the inclusion of far-away and large-scale, as well as local and interpersonal, problems as learning opportunities. The non-linear approach to conflict education, including the inclusion of politically controversial or complex international material, seemed to enhance the learning experience by providing multiple representations and many entry points for understanding each main idea. Each child handled the ideas raised in class at their own developmental level, drawing upon their own diverse experiences to make sense of what was unfamiliar. Conflict is everywhere, so conflict appeared in virtually all of their academic endeavors in the course of the school year. This global and local conflict education helped them to connect their multiple worlds to the fabric of school knowledge (Phelan et. al. 1991). Thus the time spent on conflict management enhanced, rather than replacing, their academic learning. Conflict was indeed woven together with academic achievement goals.

The most troubling question highlighted by this research has been troubling educators for years, both in the area of conflict education (e.g. Bickmore 1993) and beyond (e.g. Means et. al. 1991). This is the problem of inclusivity and success for all. In many of the lessons I witnessed or participated in with Ms. Alison's class, it was clearly evident that the children all found conflict study to be intrinsically interesting. Many children who were unaccustomed to being deeply or confidently involved in their public school education (i.e. who were relatively withdrawn in Ms. Alison's other lessons) were drawn in by the content and pedagogical processes associated with conflict education. The children seemed to develop their understanding through the processes of thinking aloud, discussing, and acting out a wide range of conflicts. The question, then, is what exactly was learned by the quieter and more passive students in this class? These were the same students who were relatively timid or unsuccessful in other academic endeavors, so their written work does not necessarily provide a good picture of their developing comprehension or conflict management skills. If inclusive conflict education is essential to the development of democratic citizenship and civic culture, then even Ms. Alison's brilliant class illustrates the pitfalls and partiality where such learning is not completely inclusive. The content regarding conflict and the pedagogical emphasis on drama and discussion did show some hopeful signs of beginning to address this challenge, but it did not completely solve the problem.

This study presents a challenge to some conventional approaches to conflict resolution (and social studies) education, by refuting the 'expanding horizons' assumptions upon which so much of it is based. Concept development allows the learner to form and refine increasingly sophisticated generalizations that will help to make future applications of the idea (conflicts) more predictable and manageable (Taba 1963). Generalizations tend to be sounder when they are based on a wider range of contrasting examples: Thus, when young people study community and global (as well as interpersonal) conflicts, their eventual understanding of conflict is thereby refined and clarified. Contrasting examples also provide points of entry for

the insights of children with diverse life experiences, thus enriching the learning resources available to a classroom group. Yes, children *can* handle global politics, and doing so can also help them to increase their capacity to handle interpersonal conflict and academic skills.

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